


An American Man of Letters

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AN AMERICAN MAN OF LETTERS

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Collier Cobb
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A slave who owned his master; a poet ignorant of the rules of prosody; a man of letters before he had learned to read; a writer of short stories who published in several papers simultaneously before the day of newspaper syndicates; an author who supported himself and his family in an intellectual center before authorship had attained to the dignity of a profession in America: such was George Horton, a negro, born in North Carolina, in 1798.

Like all the members of his race, he was fond of melody and devoted to church going; and to this religious impulse he owed the cultivation of a poetic temperament, and the opportunity to study the structure of the short story.

My attention was drawn to his work several years ago by some verses of his written for a lady's album in 1840, to the authorship of which he had relinquished all claim for twenty-five cents. The quality of the verse and the story of its author led me to look into the man's history and to search for his work in the files of the newspapers of his day.

George was the property of Mr. James Horton, of Chatham County. He was a full-blooded black man, something like the type known today as negroid, yet more Aryan than Semitic in features, and more like the natives of India and Northern Africa, than the negro south of the Sahara. He himself, Othello like, boasted of the purity of his black

blood. Such is the description I get of his personal appearance from old residents of Chapel Hill, who knew him in his prime.

George lived on the plantation of his master, where he made a pretense of working on the farm, until he was about thirty-three years old. His time in winter was spent largely in fishing and hunting, and in some slight personal service for his master. His summers were devoted mainly to protracted meetings. He became familiar with the Bible from hearing it read, and with the melodies of the Methodist hymnal, which were constantly ringing in his ears.

From these sources he gained his sole knowledge of stories and of verse. On hearing some verses read from an odd number of the North Carolina University Magazine, he asked his master's permission to visit Chapel Hill and get acquainted with the young masters who did such work.

When he reached the university town, his gift of versification secured for him ready employment. He composed acrostics on ladies' names, and love songs and other amorous verses for ladies' albums. He was also actively employed in the production of love letters. George found his new venture so profitable that he offered his owner fifty cents a day for his time, which was worth nothing on the farm. Soon his verses appeared in the *University Magazine*, some of the young masters claiming the authorship. All his lines were written down by others from his dictation, for he had never learned to write. He had learned to read, however, by the use of his Wesleyan hymn book, and learned his words before he learned his letters, thus anticipating a method of the new education. The laws of the State forbade the teaching of slaves, but George learned to read without a teacher, and his master knew nothing of his accomplishments until he was shown some of his verses.

One of George's earlier efforts at Chapel Hill, inspired by the half-dollar of an aspiring Sophomore, who nightly wandered in the neighborhood of Piney Prospect, ran thus:

At length the silver queen begins to rise,
And spread her glowing mantle in the skies,
And from the smiling chambers of the east,
Invites the eye to her resplendent feast.

The poet begged a blue-backed spelling book, and from this learned his letters, with what assistance no one ever knew. Later he learned to spell by matching the words in his hymnal, which he already knew by heart and by sight, with the words in the spelling book. In this way, he learned to read his Bible. Thus, entirely unaided by instruction, he learned to read and made the acquaintance of grammar and prosody, acquiring a simple straightforward style, and writing good idiomatic English.

Dr. Joseph Caldwell, president of the University, was interested in the gifted negro and lent him books, and George was not slow to add to his small store of the best in English literature. About this time, in 1829, Gales and Son printed at Raleigh several of his poems in a pamphlet, entitled "The Hope of Liberty", a collection made up entirely from his earlier efforts. From this pamphlet the following is taken:

THE SLAVE'S COMPLAINT

"Am I sadly cast aside,
On misfortune's rugged tide?
Will the world my pains deride
Forever?

"Must I dwell in Slavery's night,
And all pleasure take its flight,
Far beyond my feeble sight,
Forever?

"Worst of all, must hope grow dim,
And withhold her cheering beam?
Rather let me sleep and dream
Forever!

"Something still my heart surveys,
Groping through this dreary maze;
Is it Hope?—then burn and blaze
Forever!

“Leave me not a wretch confined,
 Altogether lame and blind,
 Unto gross despair consigned.
 Forever!

“Heaven! in whom can I confide?
 Canst thou not for all provide?
 Condescend to be my guide
 Forever!

“And when transient life shall end,
 Oh may some kind eternal friend
 Bid me from servitude ascend,
 Forever!”

George never really cared for more liberty than he had, but he was fond of playing to the grand-stand. It was a common saying in Chapel Hill that Poet Horton owned Mr. Horton and all but owned the president of the University.

The next example of his work is one of his earlier efforts in that style of verse making which won for him a livelihood and reputation at Chapel Hill. It is entitled:

LOVE

“Whilst tracing thy visage, I sink in emotion,
 For no other damsel so wond’rous I see;
 Thy looks are so pleasing, thy charms so amazing,
 I think of no other, my true love, but thee.

“With heart-burning rapture I gaze on thy beauty,
 And fly like a bird to the boughs of a tree;
 Thy looks are so pleasing, thy charms so amazing,
 I fancy no other, my true love, but thee.

“Thus oft in the valley I think and I wonder
 Why cannot a maid with her lover agree?
 Thy looks are so pleasing, thy charms so amazing,
 I pine for no other, my true love, but thee.

“I’d fly from thy frowns with a heart full of sorrow —
 Return, pretty damsel, and smile thou on me;
 By ev’ry endeavor, I’ll try thee forever;
 And languish until I am fancied by thee.”

This, too, was written down from his dictation before its author had learned to write.

The following stanza is from one of his poems of the same period:

“Come melting Pity, from afar,
And break this vast enormous bar,
Between a wretch and thee;
Purchase a few short days of time,
And bid a vassal soar sublime,
On wings of Liberty.”

His work at Chapel Hill and his appeals to the sympathy of the students secured for him a small sum of money, with which he hoped to buy his freedom and a passage to Liberia; but after the death of his patron, Dr. Caldwell, he gave himself up to drink, and his little savings, with all that he could earn or beg, went for liquor. A favorite scheme of his for raising money was to write some verses setting forth the sickness and distress of his family, and closing with an appeal to the students to “lend a helping hand to the old unfortunate bard”. This he would take from room to room and read, and his old employers in versification nearly always responded liberally. Dr. Battle tells us in his history of the University that “his manner was courteous, his moral character good. Like Byron, Burns, and Poe, he often quenched the divine spark with unpoetic whiskey.”

I have on my table as I write a small volume of his poems published in 1838. Early in the fifties a small duodecimo volume of his verses was published in Boston along with his autobiography. Several short stories and numerous essays of his were also published about this time.

He addressed the following verses to Horace Greely, and they appeared in the New York *Tribune*.

THE POET'S PETITION

“Bewailing 'mid the ruthless wave
I lift my feeble hand to thee,
Let me no longer be a slave,
But drop the fetters and be free.
“Why will regardless Fortune sleep
Deaf to my penitential prayer,

Or leave the struggling bard to weep,
Alas! and languish in despair?

“He is an eagle void of wings
Aspiring to the mountain height,
Yet in the vale aloud he sings
For Pity’s aid to give him flight.

“Then listen all who never felt
For fettered genius heretofore,
Let hearts of petrification melt,
And bid the gifted negro soar.”

Horton’s versification had often been employed in singing the praises of the ladies, and he had written many an acrostic and sung many a song in praise of Sally Maxwell, a charming young widow of Warrenton. For this work he received his highest prices, paid by the lovesick swains of Chapel Hill who spent their senior vacation in that delightful village. Miss Cheney of Connecticut, who afterwards became Mrs. Horace Greely, was teaching school at Warrenton, and, while making a short stay in New York on her way to North Carolina, met Greely and still further enlisted his interest in the negro poet.

When George’s student employer was willing to pay as much as fifty cents, the poem was generously gushing. Horton continued to live near Chapel Hill until the coming of the United States cavalry in 1865, when he accompanied an army officer to Philadelphia, and lived there until his death at an advanced age.

He was fond of writing poems in pairs, matching one against the other. The result of his first effort in this direction was given to a young instructor in the University in recognition of some favor that this poet had received at his hands:

THE PLEASURE OF A BACHELOR’S LIFE

O tell me not of Wedlock’s charms,
Nor busy Hymen’s galling chain,
But rather let me fold my arms
From pleasures which will end in pain.

'Tis true the primogenial flower
Arose to please in Eden's grove,
But did she not as soon devour
The silly bee that sought her love?
Then with content remain alone,
But still on wings of pleasure soar,
The storms of life will soon be gone,
Perhaps, and to return no more.
Without a surly wife to scold,
Or children to disturb your mind,
To pillage o'er your chest for gold,
And spend for trifles what they find.

PAIN OF A BACHELOR'S LIFE

When Adam dwelt in Eden's shade,
His state was joyless there;
He then the general scene surveyed,
No true delight the world displayed
To him without the fair.
His mind was like the ocean's wave
When rolling to and fro;
He seemed a creature doomed to crave,
Too melancholy to be brave,
When no true pleasures flow.
At length a smiling woman rose,
A bone from his own side,
The scene of pleasure to disclose
And lull him into soft repose,
The raptures of a bride.
Young bachelor whoe'er thou art
Thy pleasures are but rare;
A thorn will ever pierce thy heart
Until fond nature takes its part
Of comfort with the fair.

His later work showed remotely and in some small measure the influence of that group of Elizabethan poets who were wont to meet in the club-room of the Mermaid Tavern, and, after he went to Philadelphia, he wrote a number of poems in imitation of Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to his Love" and "The Nymph's Reply" by Sir Walter Raleigh.

It was in Philadelphia that he developed his gift of story telling, his stories being modelled on the old stories of the East, as he had learned them from his Bible and in many cases being bodily taken from the Scriptures and made modern as to names and places. In this he was even more successful than was Benjamin Franklin in his famous paraphrase of the Book of Job. The source of Horton's inspiration was always hid from any but the closest students of Holy Writ, and even they did not often recognize their old friends in modern dress.

In yet another respect this poet would be a paradox in our day. He did very little work before reaching the age of forty, and the most productive period of his life began when he was sixty-seven years old, continuing till his death at the age of eighty-five, in 1883.

All the examples of his verse that I have given are selected from his earlier productions, written when he was still an unlettered slave.

